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ABSTRACT

American educators can learn a great deal from monitoring the educational changes taking place in England as the British model for a national curriculum is put into practice. This curriculum, mandated by the Education Reform Act of 1988, is being phased into the schools on a multi-year schedule, with complete implementation scheduled for 1995. The curricular areas of science, math and English were designated as core subjects, to constitute the major focus of instruction in the first 6 years of school. The term "foundation subjects" refers to the three core subjects as well as geography, history, technology, art, music, physical education, and modern foreign languages. While each of the foundation subjects is mandated, the method of instruction is not, and it is further recognized that a complete curriculum will go beyond the designated foundation subjects to include other areas. Each of the foundation subjects is articulated in the national curriculum in a series of Attainment Targets (broad objectives), and each Attainment Target is divided into 10 levels of attainment. Each of these is in turn defined by a series of statements of attainment, as demonstrated in examples from the Reading Attainment Target. The National Curriculum Council has provided both in-service guidelines and specialists in curricular change to the schools. After initial apprehension, teachers' informal reaction thus far seems to be one of relief. (SR)

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A NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN ENGLAND

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A National Curriculum in England

Concern about the standards and quality of education in the United States has spawned a number of suggestions for a national curriculum which would apply uniform goals and standards across the country (Smith, O'Day & Cohen, 1991). Such sweeping changes would take years to implement, requiring the full agreement among states as well as local school districts. As educators consider this issue, they may wish to examine the British model for a national curriculum which is currently being put into practice in England. This paper is based on the author's recent visit to England. Information was drawn from school visits as well as interviews at the SEAC and the Institute of Education at the University of London.

Until recently, there was far less curriculum coordination in England than in various states and school districts of the U.S. Typically the headteacher of a school would set the tone and influence the curriculum in her or his particular school. In many cases the head would delegate responsibility to teacher committees or individual teachers. Throughout the Eighties, a growing concern for the quality of education in Britain among the public and the government led Parliament to enact the Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA).

The ERA comprised a number of elements including an open enrollment policy in primary and secondary schools and a plan for school-based budget control. However, the greatest impact has been the requirement for a standard curriculum for the entire country. This curriculum was developed by the Department of Education and Science at the national level and is now being phased into the schools on a multi-year schedule.

The curricular areas of science, math and English were designated as core subjects. These would constitute the major focus of instruction in the first six years of school. The term "foundation subjects" refers to the three core subjects as well as geography, history, technology,

art, music, physical education, and modern foreign languages. Each of the foundation subjects is now mandated by the National Curriculum. However, the method of instruction is not dictated, and it is recognized that many of the foundation subjects may be best taught in the context of work already in progress in the core subjects, particularly during the primary years (Merttens & Vass, 1989).

The Department of Education and Science recognizes that a complete curriculum will go beyond the designated foundation subjects to include areas such as career education, health education and multi-cultural issues. Similarly there is an encouragement for schools to include cross-curricular themes such as economic awareness, political and international understanding, and environmental education.

To return to the foundation subjects, how are they articulated in the National Curriculum? Each of the foundation subjects is described in a series of Attainment Targets (AT), broad objectives setting out the knowledge, skill, and understanding that students are expected to develop within that subject area. There are 14 Attainment Targets for math, e.g. "Understand and use number calculations." An example of one of the 17 Attainment Targets in science is "Earth and atmosphere." The subject of English has only five Attainment Targets. They are:

1. Listening and Speaking
2. Reading
3. Writing
4. Spelling
5. Handwriting

Attainment Targets are intentionally broad, and it is expected that students will begin studies in each of the areas in the earliest years of school and will continue to refine their development through the secondary school years. However, Attainment Targets by themselves

offer little guidance for curriculum planning. In order to provide more precision as well as a suggested sequence of development, each Attainment Target is divided into ten levels of attainment. The tenth level may be reached by only a few students at the end of secondary school while the typical student may reach level seven. Each AT level is defined by a series of statements of attainment. Following are selected statements of attainment from the Reading AT.

Statements of Attainment for the Reading AT at Level One

a. recognize that print is used to carry meaning, in books and in other forms in the everyday world.
b. begin to recognize individual words or letters in familiar contexts.
c. show signs of developing interest in reading.
d. talk in simple terms about the content of stories, or information in non-fiction books.

Statements of Attainment for the Reading AT at Level Five

a. demonstrate, in talking and writing about a range of stories and poems which they have read, an ability to explain preferences.
b. demonstrate, in talking or writing about fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and other texts that they are developing their own views and can support them by reference to some details in the text.
c. show in discussion that they can recognize whether subject matter in non-literary and media texts is presented as fact or opinion.
d. select reference books and other information materials and use organizational devices to find answers to their own questions and those of others.
e. show through discussion an awareness of a writer's choice of particular words and phrases and the effect on the reader.
(Department of Education & Science, 1989)

Level Five is intended to be completed by most students by early secondary school at age eleven or twelve.

A timetable has been established for implementing the National Curriculum in the various foundation subjects at the different age levels. The school year of 1989-90 represented the first phase with the introduce of the curriculum for English, math and science for 5 and 6-year-olds and math and science for 11 and 12-year-olds. Complete implementation of the National Curriculum is scheduled for 1995.

Teachers in England have had much less experience working within an established curriculum than American teachers have. Thus one component of the National Curriculum is provision for in-service training. The National Curriculum Council, an agency established by the Department of Education and Science, has provided both in-service guidelines and specialists in curricular change to the schools. Most of the actual in-service activity takes place within the single school unit with teachers and heads examining current practices and planning accommodations for the National Curriculum.

How successful is the National Curriculum? At the risk of begging the question, it remains to be seen. Another component of the whole program is an ambitious plan for national assessment. It is still in the planning and piloting stage and won't be fully implemented until 1997. In the meantime, there is plenty of informal reaction to the National Curriculum concept and to its first year of practice. Teachers were initially apprehensive when the idea of a single curriculum for the whole country was proposed. After seeing the mandates for the foundation subjects and their statements of attainment, many teachers expressed relief that this was essentially what they had been doing all along. They were pleased that schools are being encouraged to integrate foundation subjects and that recognition is given to a "whole curriculum" beyond the scope of the ten foundation subjects (National Curriculum Council, 1990). Teachers are also relieved that no particular materials or practices are required. Decisions on these matters remain in the hands of individual teachers and schools.

The National Curriculum and its related national assessment plan are in their earliest stages. Nonetheless, it is clear that England has embarked upon a program of major educational changes. Over the next few years, American educators can learn a great deal by monitoring these changes.

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